

Spring 2014

Beginning with the Body: Fleshy Politics in the Performance Art of Rebecca Belmore and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

Samantha Balzer
University of Alberta

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/jfs>



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Law and Gender Commons](#), and the [Women's History Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Balzer, Samantha. 2018. "Beginning with the Body: Fleshy Politics in the Performance Art of Rebecca Belmore and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha." *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 6 (Spring): 47-58. <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/jfs/vol6/iss6/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu.

Beginning with the Body: Fleshy Politics in the Performance Art of Rebecca Belmore and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to Amber Dean and Janice Hladki for their extended feedback on early drafts of this piece and to the two anonymous reviewers for their time and their encouraging commentary.

Beginning with the Body: Fleshy Politics in the Performance Art of Rebecca Belmore and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

Samantha Balzer, University of Alberta

Abstract: This article examines what I term the “fleshy” politics of Rebecca Belmore’s 2002 *Vigil* and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s contributions to the 2009 version of the performance project *Sins Invalid: An Unshamed Claim to Beauty in the Face of Invisibility*. Focusing on the embodied performances of both Belmore and Piepzna-Samarasinha, I read the skin of the artist as a site where complex politics develop. This analysis is broken into three sections: the first considers the relationship between the performing body and the performance space; the second attends to specific movements each artist makes; the third focuses on garments worn in each piece. Together, I argue, these components of Belmore and Piepzna-Samarasinha’s performances contribute to fleshy politics that reimagine the relationship between individuals and community, corporeality and geography, and the present and the past.

Keywords: Belmore (Rebecca), Piepzna-Samarasinha (Leah Lakshmi), performance art, embodiment, materiality, subjectivity, disability, Indigeneity, political art, flesh

Copyright by Samantha Balzer

I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history within which a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist I am created and trying to create. Begin, though, not with a continent or a country or a house, but with the geography closest in—the body.

— Adrienne Rich, “Notes Towards a Politics of Location”

Introduction

This piece begins with Adrienne Rich’s call to focus on the body and to think through the corporeal location within and through which subjectivity and politics are negotiated. Motivated by Rich’s attention to embodiment and subjectivity as mutually constitutive, to the relationship between spatial and corporeal geographies, and to the body as a site from which politics emerge, I develop a close reading of the embodied performance artwork of Rebecca Belmore and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha: specifically Belmore’s *Vigil*, which memorializes disappeared women from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, and Piepzna-Samarasinha’s work with the *Sins Invalid* collective, which develops an autobiographical account of her experiences of disability. The former performance, then, ostensibly works through a communal challenge in which the body of the performer is simply a conduit that has minimal impact on the artwork, and the latter appears to examine a personal history that is inseparable from the singular, performing body. Yet through attention to the performances as embodied, including the relationship between the performing body and the site of performance, the subtle bodily manipulations conducted through the performance pieces, and the garments each performer wears, the presumed polarity between the individual and community is destabilized. Indeed, these performances contribute to a reconceptualization of subject formation in which the individual and the community are developed through processes of interdependency. Ultimately,

the performance artworks of Belmore and Piepzna-Samarasinha generate complex theorizations of an embodied politics, repositioning the flesh as a site of political development.

Belmore's performance piece *Vigil* was staged in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside at the corner of Gore and Cordova Streets as part of the 2002 Talking Stick Festival. As Elizabeth Kalbfleisch notes, this area in Vancouver is often associated with the "drug trade, prostitution, and poverty," and has a large Indigenous population (2010, 280). Through the course of her performance, Belmore washes the street with a sponge and soap; writes the names of the disappeared women on her arms with black marker, then screams each name out, running a thorny rose through her teeth between names; and dons a red dress, which she first nails to a post and subsequently tears by pulling away, shredding the dress until she is wearing only underwear. Through these various actions, Kalbfleisch argues, Belmore first "establishes her presence in the street space" and then "marks the loss of women from [this] place" (281). As her movements "mourn their absence and acknowledge the violence and misogyny that their deaths have revealed" (281), they demand memorialization of these disappeared women. However, as Kalbfleisch and others have also argued, *Vigil* is not only about marking the absence of the many missing and murdered women from the area but also about acknowledging the presence of those who remain in continuously colonized spaces. Belmore's body, visibly marked as Indigenous and female, is closely bound both to those bodies that have been disappeared and to those that remain in the Downtown Eastside. Returning to Rich's language, then, the unique politics that emerge from *Vigil* stem from the relationship between the spatial and corporeal geographies Belmore occupies.

Similarly, the close relationship between Piepzna-Samarasinha's body and the spaces in which she performs is of great importance. The pieces I consider were performed by the artist as a part of the project *Sins Invalid: An Unshamed Claim to Beauty in the Face of Invisibility* in 2009 at the Brava Theater in San Francisco. In three short pieces, Piepzna-Samarasinha works from her multiple identifications as a queer disabled woman of color. Her experiences with depression cannot simply be narrated without acknowledgement of these complex identities, which cannot be individuated. Asking "what if our working-class, fucked up, chronically ill, sick, survivor bodies" were seen to be "beautiful, just like they are" (*Sins Invalid* 2009c), Piepzna-Samarasinha's performance connects her singular, bound body to communities of bodies. These questions are made more significant through the minimal setup of the traditional stage on which she performs, the precise, simple movements she makes, and the satin nightgown she wears in each performance, all of which will be explored in greater detail below. Her autobiographical work is also connected to community through the presentation of her work within a performance collective, intercut with work arising from many lived experiences of disability, particularly as it relates to sexuality and processes of invisibilizing. Because Piepzna-Samarasinha develops a critique of the dominant culture's reliance on structural inequalities through her flesh, the politics of her performance speak both to systemic inequalities and embodied experiences of difference.

Although I have positioned here Belmore and Piepzna-Samarasinha as marked by specific identities (namely, Belmore as woman and Indigenous and Piepzna-Samarasinha as woman, Sri Lankan, queer and disabled), this is neither an attempt to reduce the complexity of either performer's multiple identities nor a foreclosure of other embodiments of these subject positions. Instead, I aim to "address the question of embodiment without fetishizing the body" through an understanding of skin as a "boundary-object," as articulated by Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, editors of the important anthology *Thinking Through the Skin* (2001, 3). Similar to Ahmed and Stacey's introduction, my analysis of performance artwork does not assume the skin is "a sign of the subject's interiority" nor that it can "reflect the truth of the other" or "give

us access to the other's being" (4). So while this piece speaks about politics emerging from the material bodies of Belmore and Piepzna-Samarasinha, it does not delimit the bodies from which certain politics might emerge through the development of a reductive and essentializing position. To this end, I read both Belmore's and Piepzna-Samarasinha's work through various theoretical and methodological perspectives, including Indigenous, queer, feminist and crip theories, along with performance and disability studies.

Speaking about *Vigil*, Charo Neville suggests that engaging with Belmore's body as central to the performance leads to questions of how "we determine who is 'authentic' enough" (2007, 55) to accurately represent the lives of the disappeared women from the Downtown Eastside neighborhood. Although surprisingly little work has responded to either *Sins Invalid* or, specifically, to Piepzna-Samarasinha's contributions to the collective, a similar question might be formulated in this context, interrogating who might "authentically" represent disabled existence. Asking this question of Piepzna-Samarasinha's work is especially compelling, because although her body is marked by various identities, the medicalized disorders she claims in her art are typically categorized as invisible. The question of authenticity becomes much more complex when the "authentic" body is not visibly marked by the difference it is speaking from. Instead of pointing to certain bodies as capable of more "authentic" representations, I seek to focus on the specific politics that emerge from the performing bodies of Belmore and Piepzna-Samarasinha. The broader implication of my analysis is not that certain kinds of flesh are tied to specific politics, but rather that flesh (in all its particularities) might be understood as a site through which politics are developed and articulated.

In addition to being attentive to fleshy politics, my argument is also informed by Claire Bishop's critique of relational aesthetics, a theory that posits art to be an "intrinsically democratic" practice (2004, 67) that brings artist and audience together.¹ Bishop is wary of relational aesthetics because they are predicated on "social harmony" (79) and "rest too comfortably within an ideal of subjectivity as a whole and of community as immanent togetherness" (67). The connection between artist and audience, in this model, is comfortable and based on belonging. Through a relational aesthetic approach, one might mistakenly argue that individuals in the audience for Belmore's and Piepzna-Samarasinha's performances develop common understanding of skin, or a shared skin. Instead, I read these performance pieces as complimentary to what Bishop terms relational antagonism, a method attuned to "exposing how all our intentions are, like public space, riven with social and legal exclusions" (74). Although I will argue that both artists connect individual and communal subjectivities through their embodied performances, I do not assume that all audience members are or should be included in this community. Just as the politics developed through the specificities of the performers' skin, the particularities of the fleshy audience also cannot be smoothed over. Indeed, these politics ultimately draw our attention to the distinctions between the skin and the differential lived realities of the performer and of each body in the audience.

The language and methodologies I employ to read the bodies of Belmore and Piepzna-Samarasinha have been modeled on work in the fields of feminist performance theory, crip theory, and Indigenous theory. In her monograph *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, Amelia Jones defines body art as "a set of performative practices that ... instantiate the dislocation or decentering of the Cartesian subject of modernism" (1998, 1). That is, the very practice of performance art destabilizes a model of the subject that differentiates between mind and body. Jayne Wark, in her book *Radical Gestures* (2006), argues that the history of feminist theory that challenges this dualistic model of the subject—she begins with *The Second Sex*, but this argument can be traced back through centuries of profeminist writings and speeches—informs much North American performance artwork. I extend Wark's analysis to also consider how the refiguring of subjectivity outside of the Cartesian model, which is central to performance art, reciprocally informs alternative conceptions

of space and time, particularly as articulated by crip and Indigenous theories. In *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (2006), Robert McRuer links cultures of compulsory able-bodiedness to both spaces and bodies through Sharon Snyder's concept of "geographies of uneven development" (quoted in McRuer 2006, 72). McRuer notes that this term originates in cultural geography, and he deploys it to consider "how private or privatized versus public cultures of ability or disability are conceived, materialized, spatialized, and populated," but also how these geographies are "mapped onto bodies marked by differences of race, class, gender, and ability" (72). What is particularly compelling about this concern is that the uneven developments of topography and bodies are inherently linked so that the existing and possible spaces determine and depend on existing and possible subjectivities. Linda Tuhiwai Smith offers a clear example of this relationship in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2012), where she argues that static understandings of space and time result from the colonization of space but are also necessary to the continued production of this colonization. As such, "not only has the indigenous world been represented in particular ways back to the West, but the indigenous world view, the land and the people, have been radically transformed in the spatial image of the West" (Tuhiwai Smith 2012, 53). It is through the colonizing of space that the individual is produced as entirely separate and separable from community. And it is through rethinking space that Belmore and Piepzna-Samarasinha's performances first open up opportunities for rethinking subjectivity.

The Relationship Between Performer Corporeality and Performance Space

Within the early minutes of *Vigil*, Belmore works to prepare the space of the street corner for memorialization. Charlotte Townsend-Gault categorizes these moments as the early stages of a "classic ritual," which begins with "establishing a bounded, liminal space" (2002, 18). The liminality identified by Townsend-Gault is paramount to the performance: while Belmore performs, the corner of Gore and Cordova is both a space in the Downtown Eastside and a performance location disconnected from the neighborhood. Taking this distinction further, Kalbfleisch argues that the site is "at once a place, location, or destination and a non-place, where women vanish and where residents do not easily fit in and often cannot be accounted for" (2010, 281). On these terms, the space does not exist on the boundary between habitation and performance but is constituted instead between place and non-place. With her early movements, Belmore demarcates the space in which she will perform, but she also brings the space into a temporary state of being, demanding attention be paid to the location and to those who inhabit the landscape. Speaking of the varied responses to *Vigil* from residents in the area, Neville argues that the space was at the same time accessible, located within the geographical space, and inaccessible, because "Belmore's work was originally performed for an art audience" (2007, 55). This ambiguity leads Neville to conclude that *Vigil* "is really more of a theoretical engagement with the site than an actual engagement with people living in the neighbourhood" (55). Defining the audience as homogenous, Neville might be minimizing the connection between specific audience members and the content of Belmore's piece, but her questioning of whether *Vigil* is a performance about or for the Downtown Eastside is compelling, and can be made more complex through closer attention to the performing body. Because Belmore's body is marked as Indigenous, and therefore as similar to so many of the women she memorializes, it becomes the boundary between the theoretical and material engagement with the space. Therefore, along with existing on the boundaries of habitation and performance space and non-space, *Vigil* also exists at the point of intersection between artwork about and for a community.

Unlike *Vigil*, staged in a space that at once is and is not, *Sins Invalid* was performed in 2009 in the Brava Theater in San Francisco.² This space was not created for *Sins Invalid*, but instead is a standard theater

designed to accommodate a variety of performances. In other words, Piepzna-Samarasinha's artwork was quite literally staged and performed in a traditional theater.³ Hosting *Sins Invalid* in a standard theatrical space creates a compelling tension between the traditional elements of the location of performance and the material performed, which challenges the histories of disabled invisibility. Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander suggest that "disabled people talk about performing their identities in explicitly self-conscious and theatrical terms" (2005, 2), but although disabled subjectivity may be understood as a performance, the disabled body has historically been excluded from the theater or been used as a sensationalized object of spectacle. Performances by disabled subjects in geographies defined through histories of agential embodied performance are of particular importance because of the extensive histories of disabled bodies as objects to be gazed at, particularly those that are "unusual ... inexplicable ... [or] monstrous" (Garland-Thomson 2009, 164).⁴ Piepzna-Samarasinha and the *Sins Invalid* collective more broadly perform complex histories that neither minimize embodied difference nor reduce the performance to these differences, contributing to a multiplicity of disabled subjectivities.

One possible reading of the relationship between the spatial and corporeal geographies of Piepzna-Samarasinha's work might be that *Sins Invalid* functions as a "provisional space" (Hansen and Philo 2007, 500). Discussed by Nancy Hansen and Chris Philo in their article "The Normality of Doing Things Differently: Bodies, Spaces and Disability Geography" (2007), provisional spaces are those "in which disabled people are 'provisionally' allowed so long as they seek to inhabit, utilize and conduct themselves in these spaces as would a non-disabled person" (500). Because the stage is a space typically reserved for able-bodied performers and because the Brava Theater maintains many elements of a traditional stage, including the bracketing of the stage space by heavy curtains and the use of various lighting and sound devices, it might be argued that Piepzna-Samarasinha enacts a form of agency that is both defined and constrained by ableist culture. Yet since Piepzna-Samarasinha neither denies nor minimizes her disabled identity, such a reading would simplify the possibilities of interventionist political performance and the embodied complexity at stake in the constitution of subjectivity. Instead, as Tanya Titchkosky argues in *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning* (2011), "access to space is intimately tied with the structures of subjectivity" (41). The relationship between space and subjectivity is not simply causal; subjectivity is not determined by the spaces one can access, but rather both the space and subjectivity are mutually constitutive. Rather than imagining the stage as a provisional space, then, in which the singular performing body is made to adapt to the structural inequality that dictates the space (that is, the disabling geography of the stage), it is helpful to question how the location is made to adapt to the performing body. The relationship between the site of performance and the body of the performer will develop further as I turn towards a consideration of the movements made by both Belmore and Piepzna-Samarasinha through their performances, an analysis that will return to Ahmed and Stacey's understanding of skin.

Movement and Inter-Embodiment

Similar to the multiple functions of the site of performance, among which its spatial and temporal locations are particularly significant, Ahmed and Stacey introduce their anthology with an understanding of skin as a boundary object. In doing so, they call attention not only to how "the marking of the skin is linked to both its temporal and spatial dimensions" (2001, 2) but also to how these distinct planes interact with one another at the level of the skin.⁵ Skin is also read in their introduction both as that which contains "'the body' as such," or the object that constitutes one's existence as a singular bound subject, and as the site that "exposes bodies to other bodies," or the object that connects subjects to one another (2001, 4). Focusing on the latter,

Ahmed and Stacey turn to the phenomenological concept of interembodiment, particularly as articulated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. According to their interpretation of his work,

the very experiences which make the body “my body,” as if it were a “sole body before a sole world,” are the very same experiences which open “my body” to other “bodies,” in the simultaneous mutuality of touch and being touched, and seeing and being seen. (Ahmed and Stacey 2001, 5)

Returning to the works of Belmore and Piepzna-Samarasinha, Ahmed and Stacey’s discussion allows us to consider the dual function of every movement made in each performance: the performing body is materialized both as an individual and as necessarily connected to a community of bodies. Yet the question arises: Can the singular performing body materialize through processes of inter-embodiment, and if so, how? Is interembodiment dependent on the material interaction of different skins? Or might this process develop across the boundaries of skin, space and time through what Ahmed refers to as the “contemporary modes of proximity [that] *reopen prior histories of encounter*” (2000, 13; original emphasis)? Most simply, how do both Belmore and Piepzna-Samarasinha move beyond merely representing the bodies referenced through their artwork?

Once Belmore has prepared the site of memorialization in *Vigil*, she continues the ritualistic process of mourning the disappeared women. With a thick black marker, she writes a selection of the first names of women confirmed to have disappeared from the Downtown Eastside on her body.⁶ After the names have been marked on her flesh, Belmore yells each name, separating her screams with the act of drawing a rose through her teeth. Many have noted the painfulness of observing this process. As she screams the names, Belmore’s neck muscles tense and her voice occasionally cracks. Ripping the roses through her mouth, she must spit thorns and leaves out of her mouth before proceeding to the next name. This sequence of events, according to Belmore’s website, “lets each woman know she is not forgotten: her spirit is evoked and she is given life by the power of naming” (Belmore 2002). Focusing on this section of *Vigil*, it seems the act of naming a number of disappeared women is only one component of the significance of Belmore’s memorialization. Skin and flesh are also key elements in her construction of connected histories.

In his article “Skin Memories,” Jay Prosser argues that “skin is the body’s memory of our lives” (2001, 52). The skin, he claims, “remembers something of our class, labor/leisure activities, even (in the use of cosmetic surgery and/or skincare products) our most intimate psychic relation to our bodies” (52). These histories are materialized by skin’s “color, texture, accumulated marks and blemishes” (52). Belmore’s body does share material markers with a number of the bodies *Vigil* memorializes: the disappeared bodies are female and overwhelmingly Indigenous. These similarities and the shared histories they suggest are undoubtedly significant, but to focus on such similarities as the primary point of connection between Belmore and the disappeared women would reproduce the essentializing discourses I am wary of. Instead, *Vigil* works to forcefully turn Belmore’s skin into a record of not just her own history but the histories of the disappeared women as well. It is through the fleshy manipulations conducted within the piece that those bodies absent from the space are recalled. Reading this series of actions, Townsend-Gault argues that “crimes against the body, the native body, the woman’s body, are embodied in, enacted by, or inscribed on [Belmore’s] body, as if in an act of atonement” (18). By writing their names on her arms, Belmore invokes the presence of these disappeared subjects and visibly alters her skin. Her skin is further extended as it stretches over her muscles, straining with each screamed name, and it is torn as the thorns catch on the performer’s lips and in her teeth. These actions seek to atone for the acts of violence committed against Indigenous women’s bodies, but the marks remain on/in Belmore’s flesh, at least for the duration of *Vigil* and in photographic and filmic

representations of this piece. Returning to the questions posed above, although Belmore's body does not come into contact with other, material bodies, her skin still brushes up against the absence of these women and is altered through and because of this encounter. Through these embodied acts, Belmore redefines her flesh as both subjective and communal and her body as both the subject and object of memorialization.

Through this sequence, Belmore's body is connected to the subjects *Vigil* mourns, but in such moments her body is also, importantly and unexpectedly, connected to the bodies that remain in the Downtown Eastside. Amber Dean, in her article on Belmore and Janice Cole, describes a surprising instance of interaction with the bodies that inhabit the space Belmore has transformed into a site of performance: "At one point in the performance, Belmore cries out 'Frances,' and a woman some distance away responds, 'What?!' Belmore then shouts, 'Tanya,' and another woman's voice, from slightly further away, replies WHAT?!" (2010, 109).

In her discussion of this event, Dean focuses on the "unease and discomfort" (Bishop 2004, 70) her engagement with the women who remain in the Downtown Eastside creates for Belmore's "mostly gallery-going audience," for whom this exchange is a reminder of the "other women in this neighborhood contending with similar forms of vulnerability and social abandonment" (Dean 2010, 109). Yet, even as Dean reads this moment for the productive result of inviting audience members to "recognize [their] place in this ongoing story of violence and disappearance" (110), she is hesitant to read the naming of the disappeared women as an entirely positive moment of intersubjective formation. There is significant risk, Dean cautions, in minimizing the magnitude of the disappearances of women from the Downtown Eastside and their connection to continued practices of colonialism and gender-based violence by focusing too narrowly on the loss of individual women. This tension, between acknowledging the marked individual and the overarching social structures that systematically oppress entire populations, is currently of central concern to numerous fields of critical theory, not limited to Indigenous studies and disability studies. Reading Belmore's skin as the site at which her body is connected to those bodies that are noticeably absent from the space of her performance, as well as to those that remain in it under the same conditions, points to the complexities of these debates. As Belmore's body forms connections to bodies in different spatial and temporal locations, she balances the paramount importance of the historical and continuing practices of inequality and embodied experience within those structures with her acknowledgement of the women as individuals.

Piepzna-Samarasinha's performance is similarly evocative of an alternative relationship of the body to space, corporeality to the environment, interiority to exteriority, and the individual to community, although the narrative of her performance and the gestures made therein are quite different from those found in *Vigil*. Through most of her performance, Piepzna-Samarasinha paces slowly across the stage, her hands folded across her stomach. The politics of slowness, particularly the possibilities of slowness as a resistant practice, have been of great academic interest in recent years. Particularly interesting, especially when considered as a response to what Susan Wendell terms the social construction of disability, is Wendy Parkins and Geoffrey Craig's definition of slow living as "a reflexive approach which not only seeks to restore meaning and pleasure to everyday life but to acknowledge and address the ethical dimensions of home and work, self and other, culture and nature" (2006, 17). Some slow-living movements are permeated by troubling refusals to acknowledge privilege, as suggested by Parkins and Craig's assumption that everyday living might be separable from the increasing pace of Western life. Instead of reading Piepzna-Samarasinha's body as enacting the privileges of returning to quotidian pleasures, though, her flowing movements might be read as attention to "the *immediacy* of the ... body as an existing, living, breathing, playing, thinking, working, aging, dying physical agent" (Hokowhitu 2009, 113; original emphasis). Viewed through this lens,

drawn from Brendan Hokowhitu's article "Indigenous Existentialism and the Body," Piepzna-Samarasinha's pacing is not simply a refusal of work-centered living but the active negotiation of subjectivity grounded in the present through stories from the past. As the artist flows through the space of the stage, she emphasizes the presentness of her body and the politics of inhabiting a disabled body.

While walking, Piepzna-Samarasinha tells stories of two rivers: one that runs through queer communities and another that runs through the working-class neighborhood in which she was raised. The former, metaphorical river is filled with those who Piepzna-Samarasinha tells us were "too sensitive," while the latter is "more of a myth than a river ... a myth of a pretty woman who turned into a monster" (Sins Invalid 2009a). The monstrosity of each river marks the communities through shared disease, as the coursing waters tainted with poison flow through both groups. And as she tells each story of the flowing rivers, Piepzna-Samarasinha's arms raise to her sides. This action connects her body to the spatial and temporal locations each river flows through, as well as to the communities of people surrounding and filling the waters. Piepzna-Samarasinha's moving body becomes the site of convergence for the past and present, geographies of the body and space, and for her identity as an individual and a member of these varied communities. As previously discussed, Tuihawai Smith describes these divisions as symptoms of the colonization of space and time. Moreover, she suggests the notion that "the individual can be distanced, or separated, from the physical environment, the community" (2012, 58) is a legacy of Western colonial thought. In the moments when Piepzna-Samarasinha enacts a river-based connectedness, the distance between these abstract concepts disintegrates, mirroring the messiness and murkiness of the unclean water she has evoked. Calling on the connectedness of time, space and community, Piepzna-Samarasinha's embodied performance facilitates a disruption of Western colonial thought and of notions of sickness as an individualizing problem that needs a cure.

Similarly to Janice Hladki's reading of Bob Flanagan's performance work, through Piepzna-Samarasinha's performance the "spectator is engaged to read abjection as ambiguity through the representation of an unimaginable body and subjectivity that troubles the binaries of health/sickness and normal/abnormal and that provokes understandings of the body as uncertain" (Hladki 2005, 273). Indeed, once Piepzna-Samarasinha has told her stories, she combines the immediacy and fluidity of her movements to tackle a final boundary: the division between performer and spectator. With her hands pressed against each other in front of her chest, she likens her body to concrete bursting open to allow wheat to grow through the cracks, at which point her hands burst open. She then runs her hand across her newly exposed flesh and rocks forward, reaching with one of her hands towards the audience and then drawing it back towards her body. As these motions expose Piepzna-Samarasinha's interiority, presenting the audience with a body that is inside out, crossing time and space and other bodies, the viewers are invited to return bodies that are similarly "unstable, hazardous, bursting at the seams/seems of normality" (Hladki 2005, 273). Moving beyond a representation of disability, Piepzna-Samarasinha's embodied performance invites spectators to enter "a space for questioning the meaning of disability, non-disability, and their embodied relation" (Titchkosky 2011, 41) and to engage with these questions corporeally as all of the bodies within the Brava Theater (and, arguably, those viewing footage of the performance via digital archives) collide with one another.

Although both Belmore and Piepzna-Samarasinha transform their flesh into sites of intersubjective exchange at which the possibilities of various subject positions are negotiated, it is important to caution against reading this transformation as a sacrifice of the individual in the service of the communal. To further emphasize the simultaneous negotiation of individual and communal subjectivity, I turn to my final point

of discussion, the clothing worn by each performer. As the performers' flesh has been refigured as a site of interembodiment, their garments function as an articulation of the potentiality of both individual and communal responses to social inequalities.

Materiality of Corporeality and Costuming

During *Vigil*, Belmore pulls on a bright red dress. Using a hammer, she repeatedly nails sections of the dress to a telephone pole and then pulls away from the pole energetically so that the fabric rips; eventually, the dress is stuck to the pole in shredded bits and Belmore is left in a white tank top and underwear. As described on Belmore's website, the shredded dress "hangs in tatters from the nails, reminiscent of the tattered lives of women forced onto the streets for their survival" (Belmore 2002). This characterization is apt, but it is also crucial to emphasize Belmore's labor through the process of ripping the dress and to recognize the significance of her embodied actions. Reading this process through Belmore's skin, which I have repositioned as a site of intersubjective formation for both the individual and community, and underlining the struggle to remove the dress complicates the implications of the performance. Nailing the fabric to the post is hard work, and tearing the dress into pieces requires even more effort. As most of the dress becomes shredded, it becomes more difficult for Belmore to position the nail and hammer in the fabric alone without causing herself bodily harm. Through the difficult work of ripping the dress, Belmore draws our attention to the *process* that creates these "tattered lives" (Belmore 2002). This labor, and the dress itself, further take on what I argue is a dual nature or function. The dress, in its cut, color and context, evokes a femininity related to the figure of a hypersexualized Indigenous woman. By having damage inflicted upon it, I contend that the dress functions not only as a representation of violence enacted on Indigenous female bodies but also as a site of resistance. Responding to these violent acts by destroying the femininity symbolized by the garment itself, Belmore's labor, then, represents both a trauma that is so frequently disavowed and silenced and the painful and time-consuming work of dismantling the interlocking forms of systemic oppression that render Indigenous women's lives so intensely precarious in the first place.

Unlike Belmore, who works not to desexualize herself but to challenge the problematic hypersexualization of Indigenous women's bodies, Piepzna-Samarasinha's lacy red nightgown highlights the centrality of sexuality to her performance, which begins with the artist speaking of "every queer community [she has] ever been a part of and kissed" (Sins Invalid 2009a). By making sexuality the subject of her spoken performance and at the same time enacting it through her clothing, Piepzna-Samarasinha disrupts normative representations of disabled persons, whose involvement in visual culture is typically to "inspire awe, humour, pity, and/or revulsion" (Hladki 2005, 266). Despite her seemingly normative method of sexualizing herself as a disabled subject, however, the combination of her clothing and storytelling resists any simplistic insertion into existing paradigms of sexuality. Piepzna-Samarasinha describes treating instances where she "flare[s] or get[s] sick" by going into her bed and "fuck[ing] [her]self for hours and hours and hours," allowing her to exist in a space where "there is no pain, just [her] being the slut that kept [her] alive" (Sins Invalid 2009c). Importantly, then, Piepzna-Samarasinha positions her sexuality not as existing aside from or in tension with her disabled body but as a method of self-medication, a way in which her positionalities as queer and disabled productively sustain and support one another.

This moment also critically enhances my earlier discussion of Piepzna-Samarasinha's intersubjective relationship with the audience and the queer community. Her emphasis on her ability to manage chronic pain with her vibrator and on adopting a slut identity stresses her own control over a condition that is frequently managed externally by doctors and pharmacological aids. Instead, her body, her ability to stay

within her skin, is hailed as no less than the force that sustains her life, a powerful articulation of individual empowerment and self-awareness. At the same time, however, as Piepzna-Samarasinha clearly declares her own disabled body as independent and self-sufficient, the reaction of her audience at this moment does not so much complicate as complement my earlier discussion of the relationship between audience and performer. After linking her sluthood and her survival, Piepzna-Samarasinha pauses as her narrative is met with resounding cheers and applause from the crowd. Even as she is articulating an individual sexuality, then, the audience remains tethered to her embodied performance to such a degree that they are emphatically present even while Piepzna-Samarasinha recounts masturbating alone in her bedroom. Through the stories she tells and through her clothing, Piepzna-Samarasinha has invited the audience not only to view her as a sexualized being but to reimagine complex relationships between sexuality and disability.

Reading the costuming choices of both Belmore and Piepzna-Samarasinha, I have emphasized in this section the necessary connectedness of negotiating individual and communal subjectivities. Shredding her red dress, Belmore struggles to destroy colonial conceptions of the hypersexual Indigenous woman. Performing in a lacy red nightgown, Piepzna-Samarasinha disrupts ableist desexualization of disabled bodies. As evidenced by each performer, there is significant labor, both painful and pleasurable, in exploring the potential of these subjectivities. This labor, as performed by Belmore and Piepzna-Samarasinha, is in the service of both the individual and the community, while simultaneously disturbing the assumed polarity between these two categories.

Conclusion

It is the reimagining of the relationships between individuals and community, corporeality and geography, interiority and exteriority, and the present and past found within Belmore's *Vigil* and Piepzna-Samarasinha's contributions to *Sins Invalid* that lies at the heart of this analysis. Focusing on the space in which each performance was showcased, specific movements made by the artists, and the clothing worn in each piece, I have read the skin of the performer as the site from which complex alternative politics develop, particularly those that challenge the divisions between the above binary concepts. Each of these works, I contend, offers a site of potential, a space of possibility wherein performance functions not to obliterate or obfuscate difference and antagonism but to emphasize and sustain them. Ultimately, then, I view this analysis as aligning with Bishop's reminder that relational antagonism "subjects to scrutiny all easy claims for a transitive relationship between art and society" (2004, 79). Rather, by emphasizing the performative and political power of skin, itself a site both of individuation and relationality, I suggest we might work toward a conjoined aesthetic and political theory which sees the two not as transitive but as translatable—that is, embodying a relationship capable of productive and powerful interactivity without assuming the "unified subject as a prerequisite" or "social harmony" (79) as a goal. These fleshy politics, attuned to both the connections and the differences and distances between beings and fields of thought, offer what I hope is a productive method for engaging with political art.

Notes

Thank you to Amber Dean and Janice Hladki for their extended feedback on early drafts of this piece and to the two anonymous reviewers for their time and their encouraging commentary.

1. I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing Bishop's work to my attention and for directing my thoughts towards the distinction between political art and activism. Although I think this distinction can be murky, it remains useful.

2. I am unsure who was in attendance for this particular live performance of *Sins Invalid*. Like in my discussion of *Vigil*, I am hesitant to assume a homogenous audience with a shared knowledge or lack of knowledge of the complex subject positions *Sins Invalid* speaks to.

3. Although I was not in attendance at the original performance, I have viewed footage from this event and seen members of the Sins Invalid collective perform live on other occasions.

4. For example, histories of the freak show. See Garland-Thomson 1996 and Fahy 2011.

5. Ahmed and Stacey explain this idea through the example of wrinkles as the materialization of time passing (2001, 3).

6. Only a small number of women who have disappeared from this area are memorialized in *Vigil*.

References

- Ahmed, Sara. 2000. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Ahmed, Sara, and Jackie Stacey, eds. 2001. *Thinking Through the Skin*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Belmore, Rebecca. 2002. *Vigil*. RebeccaBelmore.com. <http://www.rebeccabelmore.com/video/Vigil.html>.
- Bishop, Claire. "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics." *October* (110 Fall 2004): 51–79.
- Dean, Amber. 2010. "Can Names Implicate Us? The Memorial-Art of Rebecca Belmore and Janis Cole." *Public* 42: 101–12.
- Fahy, Thomas. 2006. *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination: Constructing the Damaged Body from Willa Cather to Truman Capote*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie, ed. 1996. *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. New York: New York University Press.
- . 2009. *Staring: How We Look*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hansen, Nancy, and Chris Philo. 2007. "The Normality of Doing Things Differently: Bodies, Spaces and Disability Geography." *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 98 (4): 493–506.
- Hladki, Janice. 2005. "Thresholds of the Flesh: Disability and Dis-ease Producing 'Ability Trouble.'" *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 27 (3): 265–85.
- Hokowhitu, Brendan. 2009. "Indigenous Existentialism and the Body." In "Critical Indigenous Theory," edited by John Frow, Katrina Schlunke, and Aileen Moreton-Robinson. Special issue, *Cultural Studies Review* 15 (2): 101–18.

- Jones, Amelia. 1998. *Body Art/Performing the Subject*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kalbfleisch, Elizabeth. 2010. "Bordering on Feminism: Space, Solidarity, and Transnationalism in Rebecca Belmore's *Vigil*." In *Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, Culture*, edited by Cheryl Suzack, Shari M. Huhndorf, Jeanne Perreault, and Jean Barman, 278–97. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- McRuer, Robert. 2006. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York: New York University Press.
- Neville, Charo. 2007. "Rebecca Belmore: *Vigil* and *The Named and the Unnamed, 2002*." In "Representations of Murdered and Missing Women," edited by Amber Dean and Anne Stone. Special issue of *West Coast Line* 41 (1): 52–57.
- Parkins, Wendy, and Geoffrey Craig. 2006. *Slow Living*. London: Berg Publishers.
- Prosser, Jay. 2001. "Skin Memories." In *Thinking Through the Skin*, edited by Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, 52–68. London and New York: Routledge.
- Rich, Adrienne. 2003. "Notes Towards a Politics of Location." *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, 29–42. New York: Routledge.
- Sandahl, Carrie, and Philip Auslander. 2005. *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Sins Invalid. 2009a. "Leah Lakshmi in Sins Invalid 2009—Part 1." YouTube video, 5:24, footage from a performance at Brava Theater in San Francisco. Posted 26 April 2010. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3eZp2DdLLA>.
- Sins Invalid. 2009b. "Leah Lakshmi in Sins Invalid 2009—Part 2." YouTube video, 4:10, footage from a performance at Brava Theater in San Francisco. Posted 16 May 2010. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TkSG5NKRALs>.
- Sins Invalid. 2009c. "Leah Lakshmi in Sins Invalid 2009—Part 3." YouTube video, 4:43, footage from a performance at Brava Theater in San Francisco. Posted 22 June 2010. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tj9EeQsh4Lk>.
- Titchkosky, Tanya. 2011. *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Townsend-Gault, Charlotte. 2002. "Have We Ever Been Good?" In *Rebecca Belmore: The Named and the Unnamed*, edited by Scott Watson, 9–50. Vancouver: The Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery.
- Tuhiwai Smith, Linda. 2012. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. 2nd ed. New York: Zed Books.
- Wark, Jayne. 2006. *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Wendell, Susan. 1996. *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*. New York: Routledge.